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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

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PARTICIPANTS: (See below)

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(29) 27-29

Participants:

Baron Silvercruys, Belgian Ambassador  
Mr. Hervé Alphand, French Ambassador  
Mr. Luis Esteves Fernandes, Portuguese Ambassador  
Sir Harold Caccia, British Ambassador  
Mr. Paul Koht, Norwegian Ambassador  
Mr. Wilhelm G. Grewe, German Ambassador  
Mr. Ali S. H. Urguplu, Turkish Ambassador  
Mr. Manlio Brosio, Italian Ambassador  
Mr. Georges Heisbourg, Luxembourg Ambassador  
Mr. A. E. Ritchie, Chargé d'Affaires, Canadian Embassy  
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Mr. Arne Bøgh Andersen, Chargé d'Affaires, Danish Embassy  
Mr. Aristide N. Pilavachi, Chargé d'Affaires, Greek Embassy  
Mr. Livingston T. Merchant, Assistant Secretary  
Mr. B. L. Timmons, RA  
Mr. Robert H. McBride, WE  
Mr. Alfred G. Vigderman, GER  
Mr. Matthew J. Looman, WE  
Mr. Woodbury Willoughby, BNA

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-2-

Mr. Merchant said that he wished to take the occasion to review for the NATO Ambassadors residing in Washington the Secretary's recent trip to Europe and other current developments regarding the Berlin issue and Germany as a whole. Mr. Merchant stated that the Secretary felt that his trip had been very timely and most satisfying in that it had assured himself and the foreign governments concerned that our and their thinking on the German issue was proceeding along parallel lines.

Mr. Merchant said that in London the Secretary had talked with Messrs. Macmillan and Selwyn Lloyd and also, with General Norstad; in Paris, with General de Gaulle and Messrs. Debré and Couve de Murville and also, M. Spaak; in Bonn, with the Chancellor and Mr. von Brentano. Part of these discussions, Mr. Merchant said, were devoted to procedural matters, such as our replies to the Soviet note on Berlin. The draft replies had in the meantime been circulated in NAC, and the finalized replies were delivered in Moscow today.

Mr. Merchant said that the Secretary's talks had also dealt with preparations for a possible Foreign Ministers meeting with the Soviets. We anticipated in this connection that the Working Group, which had been meeting here during the past two weeks, would resume its meetings in Paris in early March. At that time they would devote their work to the substantive preparations for such a conference. It was expected that the four Western Foreign Ministers would subsequently meet together on the occasion of the NATO Meeting here on April 2 in order to review the work of the Working Group. It was possible that the Ministers might also meet in the meantime, namely around the middle of March, depending on the progress of the Working Group's deliberations.

Mr. Merchant said that as the Ambassadors were aware, we considered that approximately May 10 would be the most convenient time for a meeting with the Soviets. There were, of course, no assurances that the Soviets would accept such a meeting: they might insist on a meeting of the Chiefs of Government or they might possibly object to the agenda, the composition, the location or the date. In any case, "the ball was now in the Soviet court", and necessary preparations were going forward on our side.

With regard to Berlin, Mr. Merchant said, there had been a reaffirmation by the Secretary and by those with whom he had talked during his trip of the December declaration maintaining our right to remain in Berlin, our right of access to Berlin and our refusal to accept a substitute of the GDR authorities for the Soviet authorities. While it was feasible to make arrangements between co-victors, it was not admissible for one of the victors, namely the Soviets, to transfer their rights and obligations to the East German regime.

Mr. Merchant added that there had been some discussion during the Secretary's talks regarding the basic Western position in preparation for any meeting with the Soviets. There had been general agreement by those concerned that the basic elements of the proposals put forward at the two Geneva Conferences in 1955 should continue to constitute the foundation of our negotiating position, namely, reunification of Germany by free elections, establishment of an all-German Government,

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the right of such a Government to have a free choice in participating in collective security arrangements, assurances to the Soviets reflecting their concerns resulting from the reunification of Germany, practical security measures and finally a German peace treaty. It had been generally felt that the positions we had taken in 1955 were still basically sound and served to meet our own security requirements as well as giving reasonable satisfaction to Soviet security concerns. It was admitted at the same time, however, that a great deal could be done to embellish and improve these proposals without affecting their basic elements in order to make them more persuasive. Mr. Merchant stated that we had accordingly been re-examining our detailed positions and their presentation. This, of course, was only in the preliminary phase and the real work would be undertaken by the Working Group in Paris at the beginning of March. Paris had been chosen as the site for such deliberations in order to facilitate consultations with NAC, as had been done in the late spring of 1955. Mr. Merchant emphasized that it was our intention to keep NAC fully informed.

Mr. Merchant mentioned that we were most disturbed by the speculative stories that had appeared in the press in this country and abroad regarding the Secretary's trip and regarding developments in the Working Group's meetings. Unfortunately, there had been some element of truth to some of these stories. On the U.S. side, we were accordingly taking precautionary measures and we felt that the other NATO Governments would similarly wish to do everything possible to prevent any leaks, which would obviously be so damaging to the West in preparing for any negotiations with the Soviet Union. Mr. Merchant then opened the floor to questions.

Ambassador Brosio (Italy) asked whether the mid-March meeting of the Foreign Ministers would have to be postponed until the NATO meeting here in view of the Secretary's illness. Mr. Merchant replied that it had been originally planned that the four Foreign Ministers should meet in any case in Washington on the occasion of the NATO Ministerial Meeting on April 2. It had not been definitively decided to have an interim meeting of the four Foreign Ministers before that time and this would depend largely on the progress of the Working Group's deliberations.

Ambassador Urguplu (Turkey) asked what the State Department's views were regarding Senator Mansfield's recent speech on Germany. Mr. Merchant replied that he would rather not comment on this matter. Our line was that we intended to give the most careful consideration to all thoughtful proposals. However, Senator Mansfield's proposals did not represent the Administration's policies and probably did not represent the views of the Democratic majority in the Congress.

Ambassador Grewe (Germany) asked whether any decision had been taken regarding the continuation of talks on contingency planning affecting Berlin. Mr. Merchant replied that he expected that these talks might go on here in Washington for one or more sessions and then would probably shift to Europe, where the people concerned were more familiar with the minutiae of the problems involved. Mr. Koht (Norway) asked whether NAC would be apprised of the results of the

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-4-

talks on contingency planning. Mr. Merchant replied in the negative, saying this was the responsibility of the three powers and it did not appear to be an appropriate subject for current reports to NAC. Ambassador Grewe (Germany) remarked that there had recently been a most unfortunate story in the Chicago Sun Times regarding these talks.

Mr. Merchant stated that given the ability and imagination of certain correspondents to develop speculative stories, he thought that in general it would probably be a mistake to try to deny or comment on such stories. To do so might indicate to the Soviets what our exact position was. He accordingly thought it was preferable to reserve comment. For that reason he hoped the NATO Governments would take this position into account and not be concerned if we failed to deny stories that were obviously incorrect.

Ambassador Alphonse (France) stated that the French Government had now given instructions that nobody in the French administration, at no matter what level, would be permitted to talk to members of the press with regard to the Berlin issue or the overall issue of Germany.

Ambassador Brosio (Italy) referred to Mr. Merchant's statement about maintaining the 1955 proposals. He stated that he had observed in this connection that various elements of public opinion both in this country and abroad were now questioning the opportunity of maintaining this "package". He added that the whole matter had been further complicated by the Berlin crisis. Whereas in 1955 there had been basically two issues:-- European security and German reunification; now there were the Berlin issue and the peace treaty, as well as European security and German reunification. The Ambassador accordingly wondered whether the same "package" proposals would be put forward again or would be subject to revision.

Mr. Merchant replied that the composition and presentation of the 1955 proposals would be subject to re-examination by the Working Group. Nevertheless, it was felt that the 1955 proposals constituted the foundation of the Western position and that the basic elements of these proposals would not be changed without agreement. Certainly the search for flexibility should not lead us to adopt a position that is not in our overall interest. It was difficult, Mr. Merchant said, to predict at this juncture what our final negotiating position would be, but he would be very much surprised if the basic elements of our 1955 proposals did not continue to constitute our negotiating position.

Mr. Merchant concluded by saying that the press might be curious as to why the NATO Ambassadors had been meeting in the Department and suggested that in reply to questions, it be explained that the purpose of the meeting was to participate in a briefing for the NATO Ambassadors regarding the Secretary's recent trip to Europe. It could be said that while a report had already been given to NAC, it had been felt that the Ambassadors of the NATO countries residing in Washington would be interested in getting a briefing firsthand.

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Mr. Vigderman briefed the Icelandic Ambassador on February 17 along the above lines.

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